

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL
FOR PROBATIONARY FIREFIGHTERS**

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The Bloomington Fire Department began using Rookie Firefighter Performance Evaluations in September, 1989. The problem was that the performance evaluations currently used by the Bloomington Fire Department did not objectively evaluate or document the essential job functions of the rookie firefighter. The purpose of this research was to produce an objective rookie firefighter performance appraisal form that evaluated and documented the essential job functions for the rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department.

Action research was used to answer the following questions:

1. What are the primary components needed for an objective performance appraisal form?
2. What grading system should be used to evaluate the rookie firefighter of the Bloomington Fire Department?
3. Should the performance of rookie firefighters at training and fire scenes be documented on the performance appraisal form?
4. What are the benefits of the new performance appraisal to the rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department?

A literature review was conducted on the need to evaluate and document employee performance levels, the benefits of performance appraisals, biases involving subjective appraisals,

ways to limit problems involved with performance appraisals, and the different types of performance appraisals used in the fire service today.

The procedures were to set up a committee and select which essential job functions would be evaluated on the appraisal form. The committee reviewed several other fire department's evaluation programs and selected a format and grading system. After writing the evaluation form and receiving approval from the Fire Chief, the final appraisal form was presented to the members of the fire department.

The results showed the main components needed for an objective appraisal were the stated purpose and guidelines, definition of ratings, a comments section, job descriptions, and a section to grade and date the performance level. The most useful grading system for the Bloomington Fire Department was a combination of the graphic scale and performance essay format. The results further showed the benefits of using the appraisal form such as motivation, communication, and documentation.

The recommendations to the Bloomington Fire Department were to give annual appraisals, provide continued training for evaluators, and expand the program to provide performance evaluations for all firefighters of the department.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bloomington Fire Department began using Rookie Firefighter Performance Evaluations in September, 1989. Since their inception, there have been many changes to the process of evaluating and documenting the rookie firefighter's performance. The problem is that the performance evaluations currently used by the Bloomington Fire Department do not objectively evaluate or document the essential job functions of the rookie firefighter. The purpose of this research is to produce an objective rookie firefighter performance appraisal form that evaluates and documents the essential job functions for rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department.

Action research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

1. What are the primary components needed for an objective performance appraisal form?
2. What grading system should be used to evaluate the rookie firefighter of the Bloomington Fire Department?
3. Should the performance of rookie firefighters at training and fire scenes be documented on the performance appraisal form?
4. What are the benefits of the new performance appraisal to the rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In September of 1989, Fire Chief Ulysses Seal and other supervisory staff of the Bloomington Fire Department decided that performance appraisal

forms should be used to evaluate current rookie firefighters on the department. There were two main reasons for this decision. The first reason was to create a paper trail of the rookie firefighter's past performance. This allowed the Station Captain to monitor the firefighter's improvements and/or deficiencies on a monthly basis. The second reason was to provide the Executive Board of the Fire Department with more information needed to vote the rookie/probationary firefighter to permanent status. Prior to using the appraisal forms, the Executive Board voted on the probationary member by listening to recommendations made by other firefighters. The use of the appraisal form ended the popularity vote.

The performance appraisal was given to the rookie firefighter every month for the first six months of service. The 10 subjective questions were graded on a point system, with "above average" receiving five points and "below average" receiving one point. There was also a sliding numeric scale that measured proficiency as a firefighter. This scale ranged from the high score of 50 for "above expectations" to the low score of 10 for "not meeting expectations". The total of both scores was recorded for each month and a copy of the appraisal was given to the rookie firefighter and placed in their personnel file.

The significance of the problem is that the Bloomington Fire Department currently does not have a performance appraisal form that allows supervisors to grade rookie firefighters on specific, essential fire fighting operations. There is also no system in place to permanently document when and where the rookie firefighter demonstrated the basic fire fighting skill to be graded.

This research project addresses the issue of implementing change by

using the transitional perspective that was covered in the *Strategic Management of Change* course taught at the National Fire Academy. By replacing the current performance appraisal, the Bloomington Fire Department will be able to permanently document all fire training received by the rookie firefighter and provide the feedback needed for positive learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Performance appraisals have become a very important tool for the fire administrator. Because of legal and political pressures in the area of training and safety accountability, today's fire administrator needs the ability to evaluate and document the employee's performance level (Davis, 1991). Julius E. Halas (1988) further states:

They point out that new demands for performance accountability brought about by "belt tightening" campaigns, as well as court decisions concerning discrimination, incompetence, and negligence, make it essential that the public service sector maintain accurate, objective records of employee performance. In short, a well designed, properly used appraisal system is essential for effective management, well-being, and survival of today's emergency organizations. (p.11)

The performance appraisal should be recognized for the many benefits it provides the fire service organization if conducted properly. As a *communication* tool, the appraisal allows the employee to know how the supervisor feels the employee is doing. It identifies any needed changes in the employee's behavior, skills, or job knowledge. It also provides the basis for coaching, counseling, and future planning. As a *motivational* tool, the appraisal gives the employee the clear-cut standards for him/her to meet.

It also provides two-way communication so the supervisor can understand the reasons behind an employee's underachievement and change the behavior. As a *recognition* tool, the employee realizes that the department is aware of both underachievement and superior performance. It also allows the supervisor to recognize management practices that are inhibiting performance. And as a *documentation* tool, the appraisal becomes a permanent record of past behavior. It can be used as guideline to measure both positive and negative future behavior of the employee (Stein, 1988). As referenced in the August 1996 *Fire Chief* magazine, the author stated that performance evaluations serve three basic functions in the fire department. The first function was to inform subordinates on how they were doing. The second was to give supervisors an objective method to evaluate performance. And the third function was to identify and allow the correction of any deficient behaviors (Aurnhammer, 1996).

As performance appraisals became a part of the fire service, problems surfaced regarding the subjectivity and personal biases that occurred from their use. Dan Hadden and Sue Wells (1995) stated:

Unfortunately, since performance appraisal systems normally depend on one person evaluating another, they also provide opportunities to reflect biases. In the United States, performance appraisals have been the subject of numerous lawsuits before the courts and challenges before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (p.38)

Karen Kay Zucco and Robert Ridgeway (1987) further stated:

Without knowledge of the standards and a proper assessment program, employees are likely to perceive unfairness, subjectivity, and bias in the

evaluation. There will likely be charges of favoritism,...little real consistency between supervisors, (with the consequence of) divisiveness and conflict within the organization. (p.44)

To limit the number of problems associated with poorly written and administered performance appraisals, several objectives were recommended to be followed. "First we must realize to do it right, we need to involve the whole organization. Largely the success or failure of performance evaluation in any organization will be dependent on the managerial philosophy under which it is established." (Halas, 1988, p.11) "The organization must also establish realistic and achievable goals. They must be measurable, and specify who is to do what, at what time." (Carter, 1988, p.19) And Allen Clark (1986) further states:

To correctly evaluate personnel, departments must develop job descriptions upon which to base their appraisals. Relatively easy to develop or adapt from another department, job descriptions and personnel evaluations tell firefighters what is expected of them, how well they are doing, and how to improve their performance. (p.68)

The performance appraisal must be practical, motivational, legal, credible, complete, administered fairly, and subject to inspection by the employee being evaluated. In addition, any rating that is below satisfaction should be clearly stated on the form with an explanation on how to improve the low evaluation (Halas, 1988).

Because of various departmental structures, there are currently several different types of performance appraisals used in today's fire service.

"There is no one form that is universally appropriate in evaluating all job

classifications. No one type of evaluation format or process will work in all cases." (Gerspach, 1988, p.2) Harry Carter (1988) further states:

There are a number of different rating formats which can be used to provide the paperwork basis for equating performance to requirements. Whether a numerical index or a verbal statement is used, it should contain enough information to cover the fullest possible range of tasks performed by an individual within their specified position description.

(p.19)

The four basic types of performance evaluation formats consist of the performance essay, critical incident analysis, forced choice/distribution, and the graphic scale. The performance essay is used when there are few tasks performed on a daily basis and employees are evaluated on their broad goals. The critical incident analysis focuses on the employee's actions during a specific incident rather than on day-to-day activities. The forced choice/distribution format causes the supervisor to make the statement that the employee is performing at a pre-described, pre-designated level. It does not allow broad interpretation of the satisfactory or unsatisfactory completion of daily tasks. The last type of performance appraisal is the graphic scale format. The fire officer indicates the performance level of the employee by using definitive rating statements and places the figures on a sliding scale. This format, combined with some degree of the performance essay, comprises the basic format of most fire service performance evaluation forms (Gerspach, 1988).

In summary, the literature review identifies the importance of using the performance appraisal to document and evaluate the employee's job

performance. The research of Dr. Harry Carter, Julius Halas, and others in the field has revealed the necessity of having a performance appraisal process in the City of Bloomington. Because of this research, the Bloomington Fire Department has identified the need for changing their current evaluation process and is currently working towards completing this task.

PROCEDURES

After it was determined that the current rookie firefighter performance evaluation needed to be changed, Fire Chief Seal recommended that the old format be removed and replaced. A committee was formed to discuss what format would be used to evaluate the rookie firefighters. The committee was made up of the Deputy Chief of Training, one District Chief, two Station Captains, two firefighters, and one rookie firefighter currently in the evaluation process. The committee met several times and reviewed several other fire department's evaluation programs. The committee selected a grading system based on specific tasks that the rookie firefighter would perform in training and on fire scenes. A grade of outstanding, above average, average, and unsatisfactory would be given by the evaluator, and the date of the task completion would be recorded. There was also a narrative section included after each subject so that comments and observations could be documented. The performed tasks were given a letter grade based on the level of observed performance. An "A" was given for outstanding performance, a "B" was given for above average, a "C" was given for average, and a "D" was given for unsatisfactory. Any outstanding or unsatisfactory grade had to be explained in the written comment section. The comment section was also used

for suggesting ways to improve job performance as well as a motivational tool for the rookie firefighters .

The performance appraisal format was presented to Chief Seal and approved. The committee then presented the appraisal form to the officer staff of the department and explained how the evaluation process was to be completed. After some minor changes to the appraisal content, the final document was presented to every member of the department. A suggestion was made by the membership to try the new performance appraisal for a year and have the committee report back to the membership with any changes or improvements needed with the program.

There were several limitations found in selecting and writing the performance appraisal for the Bloomington Fire Department. The first limitation was finding a fire department that was similar to the size of Bloomington, volunteer status, with a completed performance appraisal program. Finding none, the committee chose several different parts of other programs to create the format used for Bloomington. The second limitation was the time allowed to research the project. The committee was given two months to research, select, and implement the project. The third limitation was the final performance appraisal was given only to the Bloomington Fire Department for evaluation. If it was possible, the final performance appraisal should have been given to a similar size department for their evaluation and critique of the program.

RESULTS

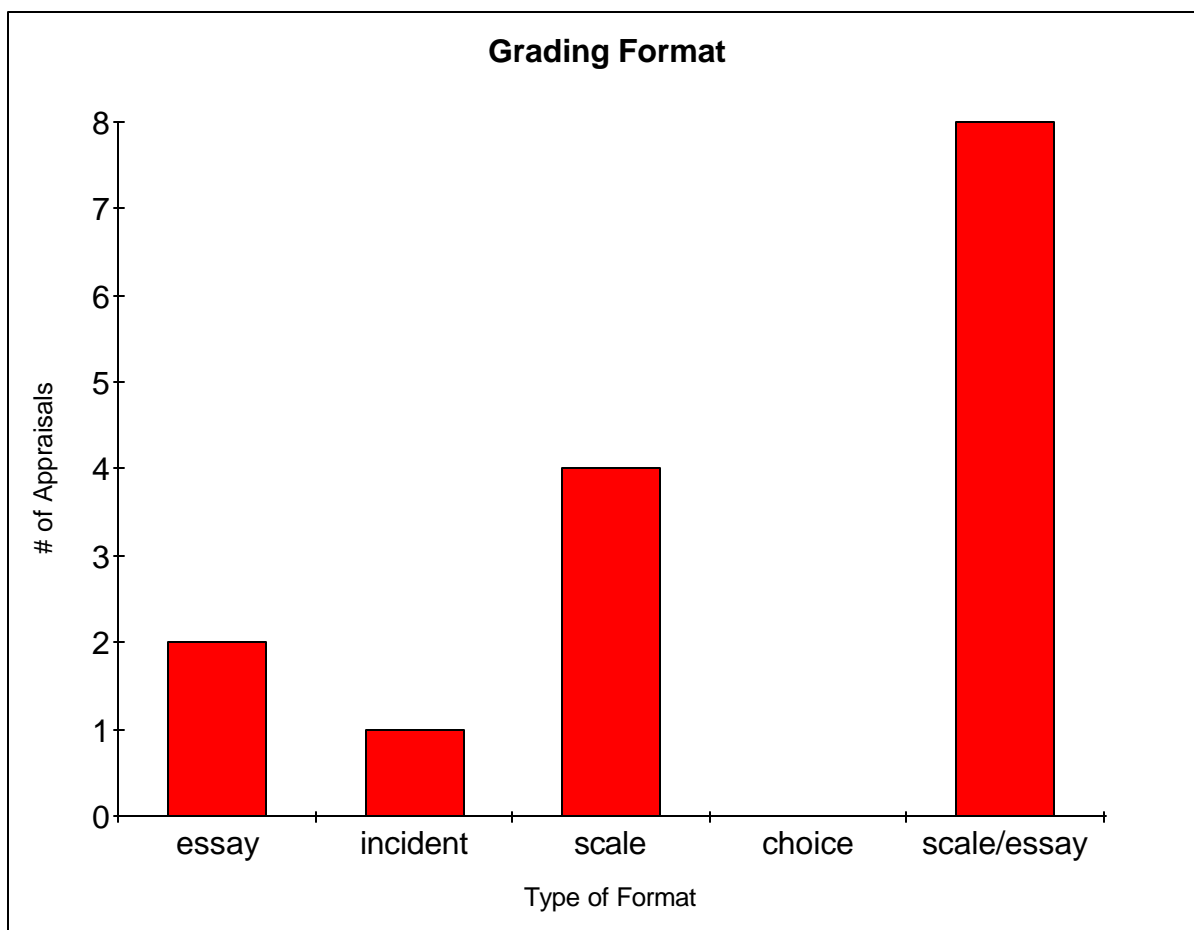
1. What are the primary components needed for an objective performance appraisal form?

The research conducted in the literature review states the first component needed for the objective performance appraisal is stating the purpose and guidelines for the evaluation on the appraisal form. This provides the evaluator directions on how to conduct the evaluation objectively and allows each firefighter to be evaluated using the same grading criteria. The second component needed is the definition of the ratings. This provides the evaluator and the firefighter a specific grade based on the performance of the task observed on the fire scene or in training. The third component needed is the comment section at the end of each grading section on the appraisal form. This allows the evaluator to provide written documentation of outstanding or unsatisfactory performance and the ability to provide the firefighter recommendations on how to improve their performance. The fourth component needed is the list of job performances to be evaluated. These were taken directly from the job description and training manual currently used by the Bloomington Fire Department. The last component needed is a place to document the date of when the firefighter performed the task to be graded. This provides the department accurate and accountable training records to be placed in the firefighter's personnel file.

2. What grading system should be used to evaluate the rookie firefighter of the Bloomington Fire Department?

The grading system that was selected by the appraisal committee was a combination of the graphic scale and performance essay formats. The research shows this format is the most common grading system used in fire department appraisals and the grading criteria matched the objectives of the Bloomington

Fire Department program. The following bar graph illustrates the different grading systems used in the 15 performance appraisals that were evaluated by the Bloomington Fire Department Appraisal Committee:



The graph illustrates that over half of the performance appraisals evaluated by the committee used a combination of the graphic scale and performance essay format. This would be consistent with the findings of James Gerspach, found in the literature review.

3. Should the performance of rookie firefighters at training and fire scenes be documented on the performance appraisal form?

Yes. The research shows that the completed appraisal form can be used to permanently document training records and work performance levels. This provides a "paper trail" that can provide valuable support when legal scrutiny occurs. The performance appraisal measures training results, not subjective opinions. This allows for more training accountability and documentation of the firefighter's job performance.

4. What are the benefits of the new performance appraisal to the rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department?

The new performance appraisal has provided the department an objective way to evaluate and document employee performance. The training objectives are now listed on the appraisal form, and the firefighter knows what he/she is to be evaluated on.

The appraisal form works as a communication tool between the supervisor and employee. It motivates the employee to improve his/her training and work performance. And it also provides a permanent document that states when and where the firefighter demonstrated the specific task to be graded.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to produce a rookie firefighter performance appraisal form that evaluated and documented the essential job functions for rookie firefighters of the Bloomington Fire Department. In relationship to the studies found in the literature review, the comparison results were quite similar. The study revealed that the most common form of grading format of the appraisal was the combination of performance essay and graphic scale. This was consistent with the statement that the sliding scale

format, combined with some degree of the performance essay, comprises the basic format of most fire service performance evaluation forms (Gerspach, 1988). Other similarities were the documentation and accountability of training and job performance (Davis, 1991), and the benefits of the appraisal to the employee (Stein, 1988).

As stated in the literature review, the fire administrator needs to have the ability to evaluate and document job performance in an objective manner. A well written performance appraisal program can provide this tool with support from the administration and input provided by the department's membership (Halas, 1988). This is essential for any performance appraisal program to work. The employee must be a part of the solution process to allow the organization to grow and improve.

The organizational implication from this study is that the Bloomington Fire Department has now changed from a subjective performance appraisal form to an objective appraisal form. This change allows supervisors to observe and evaluate essential job functions of the firefighter without bias interpretations. It also provides documentation of completed training and allows the firefighter to recognize and improve their own performance level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bloomington Fire Department has recognized the importance of the Rookie Firefighter Evaluation Program and is determined to succeed with the project. The following changes are recommended to improve the existing program and provide for future organizational growth:

1. Begin annual appraisals. The rookie firefighters are currently evaluated once a month for the first 6 months of their probation. After the

6 month period is over, every job performance on the appraisal form must have a grade and completion date. The form is reviewed and placed in the firefighter's personnel file. This is the last performance appraisal the firefighter will complete. It is recommended that the firefighter receive another performance appraisal after completing their probation period and continue receiving appraisals for each year that they are on the department. This would provide continued career development for the firefighter and performance documentation for the department.

2. Continued training for evaluators. The current training period for the performance evaluators is approximately 2 hours in length. The class is taught at the fire station by the District Chief, and the evaluators are given a copy of the performance appraisal and guidelines for administering the appraisal. There is no role playing during the class and the new evaluators never perform an actual performance appraisal. It is recommended that an outside agency professionally trained in administering performance evaluations teach the evaluators the basic performance evaluation techniques. This class would be a minimum of 8 hours and numerous performance appraisals would be performed for real life situations.

3. Department-wide performance evaluations. The performance appraisal is currently only given to probationary members of the fire department. It is recommended that every firefighter, from the probationary member to the Chief, have a performance appraisal at least once a year. This practice would guide the attitudes of the supervisors, firefighters, and training staff towards the evaluation process and allow for continued improvements to the performance appraisal program.

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APPENDIX

BLOOMINGTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

NAME _____

EMPLOYEE NUMBER _____

JOB TITLE Probationary Firefighter

APPRAISAL PERIOD: _____

APPRAISER _____ DATE _____

Supervisor's Signature _____ DATE _____

Employee's Signature _____ DATE _____

Return to Station #1 by: _____

FIRE CALL AND DRILL ATTENDANCE

A. Fire Calls

Number of fire calls attended for the month: _____

Number of truck runs for the month: _____

Total number of fire calls for home station: _____

Percentage of fire calls attended: _____

B. Drill Attendance

Number of regular drills attended: _____

Number of regular drills excused: _____

Number of regular drills unexcused: _____

Number of rookie drills attended: _____

Number of rookie drills excused: _____

Number of rookie drills unexcused: _____

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL INSTRUCTIONS

The purpose of the performance appraisal is to document the firefighter's job performance during their probationary period with the fire department. These informal reviews will be conducted by the firefighter's Captains and reviewed by their District Chief. They will be kept in the firefighter's personnel file and reviewed by the Executive Board and Deputy Chief of Administration on completion of the 6 month review period.

The benefits of a performance appraisal program include increased communication between the probationary firefighter and their supervisors. It also allows for recognition of outstanding performance and identifying job performance issues that need improvement. This is to be used as a learning experience and follow up reviews may be necessary.

The following guidelines will be used when completing this form:

1. Be accurate. Document only **facts**, not opinions. Write down and document incidents where positive or negative job performance is observed.
2. Be specific. Use actual employee performance examples to justify your ratings. Do not use your opinion on how the firefighter *might* do a specific job function. If you do not observe performance in a specific area, use training sessions to document the performance.
3. Use the "Comments" section. Any outstanding performance as well as unsatisfactory performance must be documented in this section. Additional documentation can be used and stapled to the appraisal form.
4. You will receive 6 copies of the evaluation form at the beginning of the probationary period. Complete and date the tasks you observe on the fireground and in training for each of the six months. At the end of the 6 month period, the final evaluation form is to be filled out completely with grades and dates observed. (Remedial/extra training may be required to accomplish this.) The final copy will be sent to the Deputy Chief of Administration and placed in the probationary member's personnel file.
5. If you have any further questions on the completion of this form, contact your District Chief. If none are available, contact a Deputy Chief to assist you.

DEFINITION OF RATINGS

OUTSTANDING	Demonstrates expert skills, knowledge, and abilities (must be explained in writing.)
ABOVE AVERAGE	Exceeds minimum job requirements.
AVERAGE	Meets minimum job requirements.
UNSATISFACTORY	Does not meet minimum job requirements (must be explained in writing.)

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FIREFIGHTER

Mark rating in box for each item.

A Outstanding **B** Above Average **C** Average **D** Unsatisfactory

1) Suppression Skills

A. Engine Company

_____ (date-_____) a. Knowledge and use of policies and procedures for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd companies responding to structure fires.

_____ (date-_____) b. Knowledge and use of fire engine apparatus including equipment, hose loads, nozzle (GPM), pump pressure.

_____ (date-_____) c. Knowledge of policies and procedures for response to highrise fires, commercial structures, and 2nd alarm fires.

_____ (date-_____) d. Knowledge of fire chemistry, i.e. fire behavior tactics used to suppress fire.

_____ (date-_____) e. Knowledge of building construction.

Comments:

B. Ladder Company

_____ (date-_____) a. Search and rescue

_____ (date-_____) b. Forcible entry

_____ (date-_____) c. Ventillation; horizontal/vertical

_____ (date-_____) d. Overhaul, pulling ceilings, salvage

_____ (date-_____) e. Operation of power tools; Hurst tool/chain saw/roof saw

Comments:

2) **Safety Issues**

A. SCBA

- _____ (date- _____) a. Correct application and use
- _____ (date- _____) b. Demonstrates familiarity: parts/change bottle/buddy breathe
- _____ (date- _____) c. Appropriate care and cleaning

B. Gear

- _____ (date- _____) a. Worn correctly at all times
- _____ (date- _____) b. Cleaned and maintained
- _____ (date- _____) c. No missing parts

C. Fire Ground Operations

- _____ (date- _____) a. Works as a member of the team.
- _____ (date- _____) b. Stays with crew.
- _____ (date- _____) c. Awareness of other firefighters location.
- _____ (date- _____) d. Use of PAR system/accountability.
- _____ (date- _____) e. Knowledge and use of stand-by company operations.
- _____ (date- _____) f. Knowledge and use of incident command.

Comments:

3) Rules and Procedures

- _____ (date- _____) a. Understands and follows department rules and regulations.
- _____ (date- _____) b. Understands and follows chain of command.
- _____ (date- _____) c. Understands and uses proper radio communication.

Comments:

4. Interpersonal skills

- _____ (date- _____) a. Respectful and relates well with public.
- _____ (date- _____) b. Respectful and works well with peers.
- _____ (date- _____) c. Respectful and works well with supervisors

Comments:
